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## Critical Review

# The Limits of Soft Governance in Harmonization in the European Higher Education Area

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## Contextualization

The Higher Education environment in Europe has been associated recently with multiple innovations that impact the work of all major higher education actors at all levels – national and international policy makers, representatives of national and international organizations dealing with higher education, staff and students at higher education institutions. Such recent developments result from the consensus of most of the representatives of the actors around the necessity to reform higher education, which should reinforce the creation of a knowledgeable and competitive European community. The most notable example of such reforms is the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is becoming the biggest and most influential higher education initiative in the region (Teelken and Wihlborg, 2010; Vogtle and Martens, 2014). This study explores the limits of higher education harmonization in the framework of this initiative. The focus of this article is on the European Higher Education Area overall, and a case study of the policy related to a system of credits in a single country – Ukraine. The association of the developments in the European Higher Education Area with the work of all major higher education reform actors in the signatory countries makes this article useful for increasing the understanding of these actors of the international harmonization potential of the reforms.

**Abstract:** *The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an intergovernmental voluntary policy initiative to harmonize higher education structures in the EHEA countries. Harmonization in the EHEA is often taken for granted in the literature and discussed as the context of various reforms, which leaves the analysis of the limits of this harmonization under elaborated. This article aims to contribute to the literature about the EHEA by placing higher education harmonization at the centre of analysis and focusing on its limits through a critical review of relevant literature and policy documents. It is argued in this article that although the EHEA contributes to the harmonization of higher education policies of its member states, there are limits to how far this harmonization can go. The limits are largely posed by the soft governance approach that mediates the influence of the national context on the implementation of the reforms. This argument is supported by the discussion of the case of the development of a credit policy in Ukraine.*

## Introduction

The EHEA is an intergovernmental voluntary policy initiative to “ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe” by 2020 (EHEA, 2010). The EHEA has been developed since 1999 by the means of the project called the Bologna Process, which presupposes the adoption of comparable degrees, cycles of study process, systems of credits, promotion of student and faculty mobility, quality assurance and a European dimension. The work towards the achievement of these objectives is a matter of a voluntary initiative of 47 countries, which are mainly the European Union (EU) states and some of the nearby countries. Voluntary participation in the Bologna Process in the context of the absence

of punishment for the failure to achieve the goals is referred to as soft governance, soft power or the Open Method of Coordination.

Literature on the EHEA is tightly related to the idea of policy harmonization which leads to the increase of similarities among higher education (HE) policies in the countries that are committed to the Bologna Process. Very often, harmonization in the EHEA is unquestionably discussed as a context of HE reforms and as an inevitable consequence of the Bologna Process. The main aim of this article is to contribute to the literature about the EHEA by focusing on HE harmonization and analysing its limits through a critical review of the literature and policy documents.

It is argued in this article that while the EHEA does contribute to the harmonization of HE policies in the signatory states, the extent to which this harmonization can proceed is limited. Counter to the common idea in the literature that it is the national context that poses boundaries on harmonization in the EHEA, it is suggested that they are ensured largely by the type of governance in the EHEA, which mediates a significant degree of influence of the national context on the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms. The soft governance in the EHEA lets national policy-makers shape the expression of the Bologna Process agenda in their countries.

The term *harmonization* in this discussion has a similar connotation to that of such terms as *Europeanization*, *internationalization*, *convergence*, *standardization*, and *unification*. It should be acknowledged that these concepts might not be purely synonymous. For instance, Knight (2004) and Chan (2004) state that the meanings of internationalization differ. Rizvi & Lingard (2010) and Chakroun (2010) claim that convergence denotes different things to different people. Despite these statements, the similarity of the meanings of these concepts should not be underestimated. All of them can be opposed to the realm of the national. The impact, which the national level undergoes, leads to the increase in similarities among the ways in which HE functions in different countries. The choice to use the term *harmonization* throughout this article is largely arbitrary, but it also stems from the assumption of its broad meaning and unquestionable suitability to discuss the processes in all Bologna Process member states, some of which are not generally regarded as European, such as Kazakhstan or Turkey. The term *Europeanization*, for example, would be contestable here.

The argument is developed in the following way. First, general tendencies that lead to harmonization in the context of building the EHEA are discussed. Second, arguments from the literature about the obstacles in the way of this harmonization, mainly formed by the differences in the national contexts and HE traditions, are analysed. Third, soft governance in the EHEA is discussed to demonstrate its key mediating role in the influence of the national contexts on the limits to harmonization. To further support the idea of an inevitable mediating role of the governance type in the influence of national context on the degree of HE harmonization, an example of the development of the policy related to a system of credits in Ukraine is provided. This country was chosen because of its peculiar national HE context with Ministerial centralized control over HE curriculum and funding, the lack of university autonomy, and low levels of student and staff mobility (Finikov, 2012). The influence of the national context on the development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in Ukraine is mediated by the soft governance of the Bologna Process that allows certain interpretations of the ECTS. This will be explained by analysing several international ministerial communiques and Ukrainian national level policy documents. The focus is only on the policy documents from the national level because all further developments by other actors at other levels in Ukraine are directed by the decisions of the national policy makers in the context of the centralized control.

### Higher education harmonization

This section presents a critical analysis of scholarly perspectives on general tendencies, which trigger harmonization in the EHEA. International HE harmonization is an important issue in contemporary literature on the EHEA. Harmonization in HE is guided by a general tendency of a growing role of education policy-making in the countries that belong to the EHEA, and the

lack of isolation of the development of national HE systems from one another. In particular, Lawn and Grek (2012) claim that no education system develops in isolation now at the time of increasing harmonization. Moreover, Grek (2008) argues that education became the centre of European policy-making, which is leading to the construction of an education space that makes Europe governable (Grek, 2012; Lawn & Grek, 2012). These sources are focused on education in general which, arguably, includes HE.

While HE harmonization is usually taken for granted in the literature and discussed as a context of various phenomena and as an unavoidable consequence of the globalizing world, there are also frequent cases of taking HE harmonization as a matter of analysis. HE harmonization has been studied from such angles: the production of data in growing networks, the production of common discourse, the development of interrelatedness between HE and economy, the promotion of the idea of a common European citizenship, and the acknowledgement of fear to lose national HE traditions. All of them are driven by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

The OMC is a so-called soft governance approach or soft power based on common objectives and best practices identification, deliberation and dissemination, as well as the absence of punishment for the failure to fulfil commitments (Grek, 2008; Grek *et al.*, 2009; Young, 2010; Delfani, 2013). The OMC has been included in many discussions on the EHEA. Such popularity of the OMC can be explained by the following claims. Fejes (2006) argues that 'no longer is governing made through legislation. Instead it is made through different techniques/tactics [the OMC]' (p.224). Additionally, Hudson (2011) suggests that soft government may be 'as powerful as direct control mechanisms [mandatory implementation through legislature]' (p.671).

There are two approaches to the relationship between HE and soft power. On one hand, some scholars define soft power not as something that governs HE, but rather they equate HE with soft power to argue that HE impacts other areas (Polglase, 2013; Sayamov, 2013). For instance, education, including HE, is positioned as the soft power in the global sustainability debate because education contributes to the formation of certain human habits related to sustainable development (Sayamov, 2013). On the other hand, many scholars, who represent the majority of those dealing with the OMC and HE, position HE as the area that is impacted by soft power. Soft governance creates a space in which actors are drawn to work within it and to produce it (Lawn, 2006).

One of the angles from which HE harmonization has been studied is the production of data through growing networks. Data – performance indicators, benchmarks and standards – are at the heart of 'fabricating' a European education space (Grek, 2008; Grek *et al.*, 2009; Lawn & Grek, 2012). The growth of networks and the mobility of actors among them is the other driver of the OMC (Grek *et al.*, 2009).

Another angle from which HE harmonization has been studied is the production of a common discourse. A glance at the vocabulary reiterated in the scholarship about the EHEA gives an impression of a general consensus about the essence of the EHEA. Some authors acknowledge the hegemony of this vocabulary. In particular, Hoppers (2009) states that "partnership and collaboration have become buzzwords" (p.47). Fejes (2006) mentions "the planetspeak discourses of the knowledge based society, employability, mobility, lifelong learning, and quality assurance" (p.208). And Novoa (2007) refers to a "hackneyed terminology such as rigour, efficiency, accountability, responsibility, autonomy, market, choice, customers, etc." (p.145).

A growing connection between HE and the economy constitutes one more way in which HE harmonization has been studied. Ozga (2008) argues that only the knowledge which works for the economy is important nowadays. Brine (2006) and Tabulawa (2009) see the result of such a tendency in the need of a new type of highly-skilled self-programmable flexible worker which is to be prepared by HE. Some scholars negatively evaluate such trends. Specifically, Zgaga (2009) and Young (2010) state that HE is now becoming instrumentalised, and that HE

categories are now being replaced by economic ones.

HE harmonization is also studied through the idea of common citizenship or identity in the EHEA. For instance, Dale & Robertson (2009) argue that there is still no single view of what is meant to be European. On the contrary, Lawn & Grek (2012) explain that European identity, promoted by different HE policies, is actually being developed. The authors do acknowledge that such an identity is a 'unifying myth' because Europe is essentially a heterotopia which is only imagined as a homogeneous unity (p.44). Apart from this, the discussions of the image of the student and the image of the citizen coincide. Flexibility and mobility are now seen as essential characteristics of both the student (Brine, 2006; Tabulawa, 2009) and the citizen (Papatsiba, 2009). Moreover, it can be argued that the citizens of the states that belong to the EHEA become lifelong flexible and mobile students whose constant self-improvement enriches the overall positive image of the EHEA. The relationship between the development of citizen and student identities is justified by Zgaga (2009) who claims that "citizenship is a concept inherent to the idea of the university and the role of higher education" (p.177). Likewise, Papatsiba (2009) claims that flexible and mobile citizens are formed through HE mobility programs.

One further way through which HE harmonization is studied is the acknowledgement of fear. It is caused by the disappearance of some national peculiarities that implies nations' adjustment to common HE standards. In particular, Field (2003) and Pyykko (2008) mention the Bologna Process as a threat for national HE systems. Similarly, Hudson (2011) discusses resistance of HE communities to total harmonization because it is associated with the abandonment of national HE traditions. Field's work (2003) also contains references to other issues that might be endangered by the Bologna Process implementation, such as national culture in general, given the need to change program and course content within the Bologna Process. All of these claims are not surprising – they seem to be a continuation of the tendency to associate national HE systems with some form of national heritage (Field, 2003, citing Wessels *et al.*, 2003; Dittrich *et al.*, 2004), and to recognize that HE is a means of national pride (Lawn and Grek, 2012). Harmonization in HE systems had been a matter of hesitation and resistance for a long time even before the idea of the Bologna Process emerged (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004; Papatsiba, 2006; Dale & Robertson, 2009).

### **Differences in the national contexts as an obstacle in harmonization**

After analysing general features of HE harmonization, it is timely to look at the nature of obstacles on the way to this harmonization. Differences in the national contexts are presented in the literature on the EHEA as a key limiting factor in HE harmonization.

Most of the scholars that conduct some sort of cross-country comparison of the Bologna Process implementation have pointed to a crucial role of a country's cultural, historical, economic context in shaping the experience of the Bologna Process (Dittrich *et al.*, 2004; Ozga & Jones, 2006; Papatsiba, 2006; Heinze & Knill, 2008; Pyykko, 2008; Zgaga, 2009). In particular, Ozga & Jones (2006) imply a great role for the national context in shaping the expression of international HE policy ideas at the national level by discussing the relationship between travelling or international, and embedded or local policies. The scholars argue that the former type of policies "may get recontextualized and remodeled according to local and national histories, traditions and social relations" (p.14). As a result, the problem of formal, technical or structural implementation of the Bologna Process policies without much attention to substance has been noticed in a wide range of countries. This tendency is reinforced by:

- the lack of quality control mechanisms in Portugal (Portela *et al.*, 2009);
- the preservation of the traditional degree structure along with the acquisition of the Bologna Process cycles in Russia and Switzerland (ESU report, 2005; Pyykko, 2008);
- the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System without assigning the meaning of student workload system to it in some post-Soviet countries, as well as



Denmark, Finland and Norway (ESU report, 2005; Zgaga, 2009);

- the extension of the meaning of the European Credit Transfer System in various directions in different countries (Karran, 2004);
- the lack of introduction of non-structural elements of the Bologna Process (e.g. common meanings of competencies) in different countries (Kehm, 2010; Yagci, 2010);
- corruption in many countries (Field, 2003; Round & Rodgers, 2009; Osipian, 2010);
- different understanding of the Bologna Process key terms (e.g. qualification framework) by the stakeholders in different countries (Rauhvargers, 2004; Lazetic, 2010).

### **Limited harmonization in the context of soft governance**

A number of authors express some speculation about limited HE harmonization in the context of soft governance. However, these authors' preoccupation with a different focus leaves the idea of the main argument in this article underelaborated and undeveloped.

Green (1999), whose work dates back to the commencement of the Bologna Process, argues that national HE systems started becoming more international but this tendency did not mean the disappearance of national HE systems. The author explains this position by stating that HE policy discourse became assimilated, whereas policy practice in different countries did not change much. A more recent work by Witte (2006) includes a similar statement. The author argues that no real harmonization happens among HE systems where the Bologna Process has been introduced because even though some structural changes in each of them do take place, the essence of HE in different countries remains different. Both authors do not uncover the reasons behind the tendency of sustainability of established policy practices in different countries. These reasons may be related to the voluntary nature of the Bologna Process, which offers space for discourse harmonization, but it is not conducive to ensuring full adherence of countries to the principles of the Bologna Process in practice.

The Bologna Process is argued to be transformed from a voluntary enterprise at the international level into a mandatory initiative at the national level by Ravinet (2008). This claim can be further developed by suggesting that a non-binding nature of the Bologna Process at the international level is a key reason for the national governments to pick up the bits of the action lines they are interested in at a certain point of time and leave out the remainder in the process of making the Bologna Process reforms mandatory in their countries.

Garben (2010) and Vukasovic (2013) emphasize a lack of coordination of the implementation of the Bologna Process HE policy ideas in the context of the voluntary nature of the Bologna Process. Vukasovic (2013) also adds that there may be only "partial convergence at the most" in HE in the EHEA because of the complexity of tasks and a lack of 'mediating factors' (p.313). The author does not explain the meaning of the 'mediating factors'; however, they can be assumed to be associated with governance mechanisms that would be supposed to ensure an efficient fulfilment of the range of complex tasks. The lack of such mechanisms can be further linked to the voluntary nature of the Bologna Process.

There is also a perspective that suggests that a total harmonization of HE system in the EHEA countries is not even presupposed. For instance, Lajh & Stremfel (2011) state that while the Bologna Process aims at the development of compatible and comparable HE degrees, it also targets the preservation of national traditions in HE. Similarly, Dale and Robertson (2009) describe the Bologna Process as a tool to connect HE systems rather than to produce harmonization. Following this logic, it can be further claimed that although a growing role of the OMC should be acknowledged, the claim that traditional government of HE by legislation is in the past may be too hasty as soft governance of the EHEA actually allows divergent

national practices.

All these scholarly arguments demonstrate that on one hand, the Bologna Process aims at harmonization of HE systems through the soft power of the Bologna Process; and on the other hand, these arguments support the main argument of this article by pointing to the idea that this harmonization has limits. The remaining part of the article illustrates how soft governance in the EHEA lets national policy-makers shape the expression of the Bologna Process agenda in their countries in particular ways that can only partially contribute to the overall harmonization in the EHEA. The case of the development of the European Credit Transfer System in Ukraine is used to support the idea that it is not the national context that directly poses boundaries on harmonization. Rather, it is the type of governance in the EHEA – the soft power – that allows a significant degree of influence of the national context on the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms.

### **The case of the European Credit Transfer System in Ukraine**

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was suggested as an example of a credit system at the international ministerial conference in Sorbonne (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). The ECTS remained a variant of a system of credits that the Bologna Process countries were suggested to implement for several years. For example, in 2001, “a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible” is mentioned in the Prague Communiqué as a way to support student mobility through assigning credits to student workload that can be accumulated and transferred among Higher Education Institutions (2001, p.2). In further Communiqués starting from 2007, the ECTS is not mentioned as an option of a credit system any more but rather discussed as the only variant. It was decided at the London Conference that “Efforts should concentrate in future... on proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload” (London Communiqué, 2007, p.2). The ECTS was positioned as the only version of the credit system, perhaps because the countries that had joined the Bologna Process had adopted the suggested variant of a credit system (i.e. ECTS). The problem of a proper implementation of the ECTS was raised probably because of a great variation in the ways it had been implemented in different countries, as suggested by Karran (2004) who argues for different meanings that the Bologna Process member states established.

The first Bologna Process-related initiative in Ukraine was a pilot project that commenced in 2004 with the aim to implement the credit-module system (CMS) at 59 pilot universities by 2008. According to decree №48 (2004), the CMS is “a model of study process organization which is based on the combination of the module way of studying and examination education units (examination credits)”. The CMS was an amalgamation of credits that were suggested at the international ministerial conferences and modules which were foreign to the ECTS idea developed at the conferences. Decree №48 provides definitions of the two main components of the CMS. The credit stands for “a unit of measuring study workload required for understanding content modules” and the module means “a completed part of a study program” which basically means a theme or topic.

The idea of modules can be traced back to 1993, which was long before the Bologna Process emerged and was introduced in Ukraine. It is stated in decree №161 (1993) that “A HEI can use modules or other forms of the evaluation of students’ knowledge after a logically completed part of lectures and seminars in a certain subject, and use the results of this evaluation to calculate the final course grade.” This form of assessment is presented in the decree as alternative to the end-of-semester students’ performance assessment. The module principle of studying was combined with credits in the CMS in 2004 most likely because of the idea of accumulation in a credit system that was agreed upon at the ministerial conferences. This agreement is clear from the following statement: “...the ECTS becomes not only a transfer but also an accumulation system” (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, p.4). No explanation of the essence of accumulation was documented at the international ministerial conference that time, which can be seen as an expression of imperfections of negotiations in the soft governance of the

Bologna Process. Later on, accumulation was explained to be related to amassing credits (London Communiqué, 2007). However, back in 2004, Ukrainian policy-makers interpreted accumulation in terms of amassing grades during a semester to make the final grade. This is suggested on the basis of the essence of the module principle of studying which was taken up and combined with credits in the CMS.

The CMS was presented as a variant of the ECTS, which was implicitly and explicitly stated in policy documents (decrees №48, 2004; №49, 2004; №774, 2005; №612, 2007). For instance, the CMS is claimed to be implemented “to adapt the ideas of the ECTS to the system of higher education in Ukraine” in decree №48 (2004), and the statement that the CMS aimed at “implementing a system of credits compatible with the ECTS” is included in decree №49 (2004). These statements are certainly a response to the voluntary and approximate character of the ECTS idea developed at the international ministerial conferences after the commencement of the Bologna Process. So the module principle of studying which can be seen as a Ukrainian national contextual feature cannot be seen as a key factor in the formation of the credit system in Ukraine by the combination of the new idea of credits with the national idea of modules. The soft power of the Bologna Process mediated this formation by the overall voluntary nature of the Bologna Process, by the suggestion of the ECTS as a variant of a credit system and by the lack of documented specification of the features of the ECTS, such as accumulation.

After the pilot project about the implementation of the CMS at 59 universities ended in 2008 as scheduled (decree №48, 2004), the ECTS was to be implemented at all universities in the country (decree №943, 2009). The change of the CMS into the ECTS was apparently triggered by the above explained consensus among the representatives of the international ministerial conferences that the ECTS was to become the credit system rather than a variant of it, as it used to be previously. However, the approach of the policy-makers who issued the ECTS decree in 2009 to the conceptualization of the policy demonstrates that no substantial changes were planned to be made except for the substitution of the names of credit policies. The ECTS was not defined in this short decree. So the difference, if any, between the ECTS and the CMS is questionable. Moreover, recent assessment of the implementation of the ECTS by Rashkevych (2014) and in the Finikov (2012) demonstrates that the practice of the ECTS has not changed in comparison to the CMS. This may be seen as evidence that the Bologna Process soft power is not capable of propelling significant changes in the substantive elements of the credit system in Ukraine that mediates and contributes to the continuation of the influence of the national context expressed in the module principle of studying. Moreover, this soft power contributes to the preservation of the limits of harmonization in the ways the ECTS works.

## **Conclusion**

This article has aimed to extend the idea, common in the literature, that the soft governance in the EHEA contributes to HE harmonization. It has been argued that an apparent harmonization of HE policies in the EHEA is limited by the soft governance approach. This approach puts forward policy-making guidelines that lack precision and allow for extensive flexibility and great contextual influence in the policy-making process in the EHEA signatory countries.

The argument put forward in this article has been supported by the case of the development of a credit policy in Ukraine to demonstrate how the EHEA soft governance permits the influence of the national context on the country Bologna Process policy-making. To reflect on the value of the case for the argument, it should be emphasized that the example of the credit policy development in Ukraine has been used to support the argument suggested on the basis of the literature review. The argument pertains to the whole EHEA for two reasons. First, the argument has been partly generated on the basis of the literature, which discusses multiple EHEA countries. Second, the argument has been strengthened by the case of Ukraine, the significance of which cannot be downplayed because the Bologna Process policy-making in

each and every signatory country matters to judge the situation in the EHEA more generally. Since one case has demonstrated that the soft governance does mediate the influence of the national context on the Bologna Process reforms, the role of the soft power in the EHEA generally cannot be claimed to be the opposite because the situation in the EHEA is a confluence of the developments in each of its countries. Clearly, further research is needed to explore how soft governance mediates the influence of other national contexts – both of the EU and non-EU countries – on the Bologna Process policy-making in these states.

The comparison of the results of these studies could, hypothetically, further trigger research interest in the necessity to (re)consider the notion of success in achieving the EHEA goals associated with harmonization of HE systems. Since the Bologna Process is governed by the soft power which poses limits to harmonization, expecting the implementation of the Bologna Process policies in the EHEA counties that would perfectly resemble the policy ideas agreed upon at the international ministerial communiques is too ambitious. Thus, the literature that tends to judge the degree of success in the process of the adaptation of international policies at the national level (e.g. Witte, 2006) is doomed to be linked to the discussion of a degree of failure in this adaptation. The recognition of impossibility of the soft power to yield perfect resemblance between policy ideas at the international and national levels poses a necessity to search for novel ways of the conceptualization of success in the Bologna Process policy transfer which can also be done in future research.

The tendency of a limited harmonization in the EHEA will continue as current limitations to HE harmonization may not be overcome in the context of soft governance of the Bologna Process at the international level. A different type of governance – by legislature – at the international level is impossible because it would require a different political context of the EHEA. It would transform the essence of the Bologna Process from a democratic initiative that is self-sustained by its attractiveness into an obtrusive endeavour in a centralized system with a minimal role of national policy-makers at the national levels.

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